

Are Support Groups Beneficial for Fibromyalgia Patients?

The Negative Effects of Social Comparison For Those Who Want it Most

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Peer support plays an important role in coping with many chronic health problems. Peer support may, however, contain a risk. Research has indicated that people with a high social comparison orientation (SCO; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) are, on the one hand, more interested in peers, but may, on the other hand, be negatively affected when they are confronted with peers who are worse-off (e.g. Groothof, 2004). The present research studied the influence of SCO on the affective consequences of social comparison with worse-off peers during peer support among fibromyalgia patients.

We predicted that fibromyalgia patients, as they have a higher SCO

- seek more contact with other fibromyalgia patients
- identify themselves more strongly with worse-off fibromyalgia patients
- experience more negative affect when meeting worse-off fibromyalgia patients because of this increased identification

Method

Participants: 88 fibromyalgia patients were recruited at support group meetings and through the website of a Dutch organization for fibromyalgia patients.

Measures:

Social comparison orientation (11 items, $\alpha = .82$). "I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life", "I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Contact with other fibromyalgia patients

"How often do you attend meetings with other fibromyalgia patients?" "How often do you go on the internet to meet other fibromyalgia patients?" (1 = *never*, 4 = *very often*)

Negative affect generated by comparisons with worse-off others (3 items, $\alpha = .84$)

"When I meet other fibromyalgia patients who are doing worse, I feel frightened" (1 = *not*, 5 = *very strongly*)

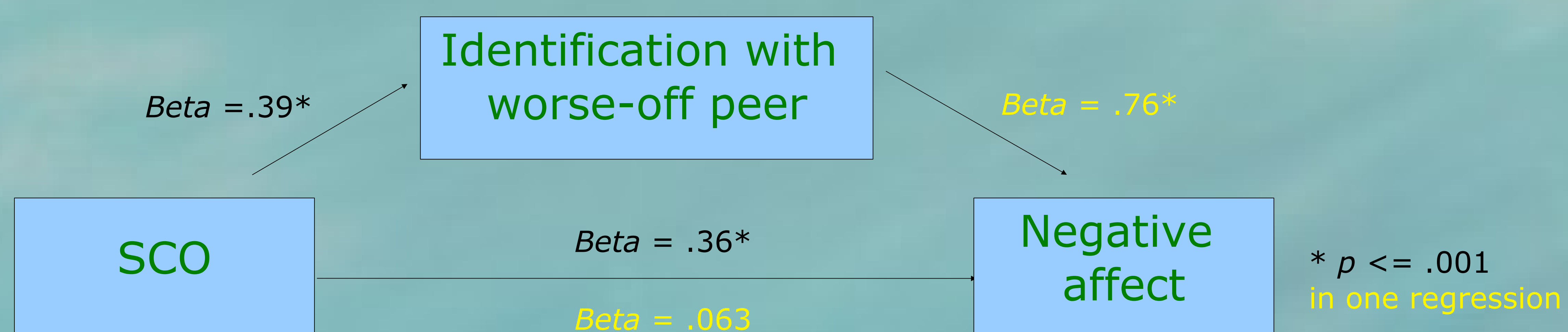
Identification with worse-off peers (3 items, $\alpha = .86$).

"When I see fibromyalgia patients who are doing worse, I recognize myself in them". (1 = *not*, 5 = *very strongly*)

Results

As fibromyalgia patients have a higher SCO,

- they seek more contact with others fibromyalgia patients, but only through the internet ($r(86) = .25, p < .05$), and not through regular meetings ($r(87) = -.01, ns$).
- they identify themselves more strongly with worse-off peers ($r(85) = .39, p < .001$).
- they experience more negative affect when meeting peers who are worse-off ($r(84) = .36, p = .001$). Mediation analyses showed that this increased negative affect is due to identification with worse-off peers (perfect mediation).



Conclusion

Despite the many beneficial effects of peer support, the present study showed that as fibromyalgia patients have a higher need to compare themselves with others, they are more negatively affected by social comparison with peers who are worse-off, because they tend to identify themselves with worse-off peers.

References

- Gibbons, F. X., & Buunk, B. P. (1999). Individual differences in social comparison: Development of a scale of social comparison orientation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 129-142.
- Groothof, H. A. K. (2004). *When others are doing better or worse: Responses from the heart and the head*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Groningen, The Netherlands.